



Opinion

ACROSS THE STATE

Try charter schools

The Paducah Sun

The news that African-American and Hispanic students in Kentucky are dropping out of school at a higher rate than whites prompted the usual hand wringing at the state Department of Education.

A report released by the department showed the dropout rates for blacks and Hispanics rose for the second year in a row. Almost 6 percent of African-American students left school without getting a high school diploma; the dropout rate for their white peers was 3.2 percent, a slight decline from the previous year.

Lisa Gross, a spokeswoman for the education department, expressed dismay about the lost opportunities represented by the dropout statistics. "Its disappointing," she told *The Courier-Journal* of Louisville. "Weve got to do something."

Education officials have been promising to do something about the racial gap in the nation's public schools for more than 30 years.

As a group, black children from low-income families lag behind white students from middle-class homes in most measures of academic achievement. Although black students have improved their academic performance, the racial divide still persists, despite repeated efforts by school officials to "do something" about it.

President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind education reform initiative was driven in large part by the belief that the schools need to do more to bring minority students fully into the educational mainstream.

The president asserts that the biggest obstacle to eliminating the education gap is what he calls "the soft bigotry of low expectations." In Bush's view, some education officials make only a rhetorical commitment to improving the inner-city schools where many minorities from poor families are concentrated. In reality, these children often are quietly written off as low-achievers.

Kentucky's vaunted education reform program clearly has not erased racial disparities in the schools.

Thousands of black students attend schools that fail to meet state academic standards. It's not surprising that some of these students are giving up on education before they obtain the most basic academic credential - a high school diploma.

In a world in which a high school diploma provides little guarantee of economic security, dropouts are almost certain to live with failure and diminished expectations.

The state's education leaders aren't indifferent to the plight of black students who fall through the system's cracks. Unfortunately, however, there is no evidence the school bureaucracy is willing to move beyond orthodox strategies for helping struggling minority students - strategies that consistently have failed to produce the desired results.

A different approach is promoted by the No Child Left Behind law: Allow students in poorly performing schools to transfer to better schools.

This option exists in Kentucky, but mainly in theory. School choice is extremely limited in this state: The only parents who can exercise real choice are those with the financial means to put their children in private schools or move to neighborhoods with topflight public schools.

Too often, black children in low-income neighborhoods are trapped in failing schools. If state education officials truly are committed to closing the racial gap, they will support programs that give these children a chance to transfer to a better school.

Kentucky needs charter schools that have been freed from bureaucratic rules and permitted to tailor their programs to the wishes of parents and the needs of children. This popular form of school choice has been adopted in 40 states: Why not try it in Kentucky? The state could take reform to the next level with nontraditional public schools that give parents a greater stake in the education of their children.

What does the state have to lose by allowing at least limited school choice? The state already is losing thousands of young African-Americans who drop out of the public schools and enter the adult world without a foundation for success.

It's time for school officials to do something that has the potential to shake up the status quo and create real hope for children facing the prospect of a lifetime as second-class citizens.